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Reactions to the Papal Shooting

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WASHINGTON — Italy's investigation into the shooting of the pope may be titillating the public, but the reaction of government and church officials in the U.S. has been intriguingly subdued.

As the world now knows, Italian investigators are doggedly tracking evidence suggesting that Bulgaria and, by extension, the Soviet Union may have propelled Mehmet Ali Agca into St. Peter's Square to try to kill Pope John Paul II on May 13, 1981. The evidence is far from conclusive, but the implications of any Soviet involvement in the assassination attempt would be huge for both the Catholic Church and the U.S. government.

Yet neither speaks officially about the issue. Government officials are reluctant to address it even privately. "The attitude around here, at least of responsible people, is shut up and let this thing unfold," says an aide to Secretary of State George Shultz.

Similarly, the shooting hasn't noticeably affected the deliberations of Catholic bishops over a draft statement on nuclear-arms policies—a statement that has been criticized for ignoring Soviet intentions and methods. "The discussion of the attempted assassination of the pope hasn't entered into our discussion and our deliberations on the draft letter at all," says Bishop George Fulcher of Columbus, one of five prelates revising the draft. Other participants say they expect the shooting investigation to have some eventual impact, but not much.

Shying Away From the Issue

The reasons for this low-key reaction in the U.S. are complex. In part, church and government officials shy away from the issue simply because the enormity of the implications of some Soviet involvement make them want more conclusive evidence.

From the beginning, knowledgeable U.S. officials say, the American intelligence community has been skeptical that the Soviet KGB was behind the shooting or could be clearly linked to it through Bulgaria. This skepticism continues despite Italy's recent arrest of one Bulgarian, its implication of others and the fact that some Italian officials have publicly endorsed the theory that Moscow wanted the pope killed to stop him from interfering in Polish affairs.

Agca has given Italian investigators convincing evidence that he worked closely with Bulgarians identified as secret agents, U.S. experts acknowledge. And Agca apparently has said the Bulgarians hatched the shooting plot. The Bulgarian secret service, in turn, has a long history of acting only under orders from the KGB.

U.S. analysts don't doubt that Agca is linked to Bulgaria and its arms and drug-smuggling operations. But they haven't seen evidence that his connection translates into a Bulgarian or Soviet command to kill the pope. "There's very circumstantial evidence the Italians are using that wouldn't stand close scrutiny," says one official.

Besides their skepticism, though, U.S. officials have important tactical reasons for keeping quiet. The State Department reasons that the U.S. would only damage the credibility of the Italian investigation if it appeared to be pushing it along. "I don't think we could in any fashion help the effort, and probably could hurt it, if we appeared to be making it a propaganda effort," says a State Department aide.

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R., N.Y.), who has researched the assassination and is inclined to believe there is a Bulgarian connection, thinks this rationale is sound. The U.S. government, he says, has "rightfully underplayed" the investigation so it can't be accused of "manipulation of the news."

U.S. analysts also are waiting for an important decision Italy has to make in the next few weeks: whether to prosecute Sergei Ivanov Antonov, the alleged Bulgarian accomplice they have in custody. A decision to prosecute would be read by American officials as a sign Italy may have a case that is becoming more sound.

In the meantime, the U.S. hasn't undertaken any independent investigation, and Under Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger has warned some officials against speculating about the Italian inquiry.

But to critics, the U.S. government's silence and insistence on more evidence amount to an attempt to avoid the grim conclusions that would have to be drawn from a Soviet link. These critics assert that positive proof of a Soviet role can't ever be found, but that the U.S. has seen more than enough convincing circumstantial evidence to begin speaking up.

"What you know already is much more than one would expect to know" about an assassination plot, says one congressional aide. "We are deciding, effectively, that we don't care."

In the long run, though, it would be very difficult to ignore any proof of a Soviet link to the shooting of a world religious leader. Soviet complicity would raise new questions about whether the U.S. should cooperate with the Kremlin in matters like arms-control treaties and summit negotiations. It also could affect the struggle between the superpowers for the friendship of peoples in regions like heavily Catholic Latin America.

The impact of any Soviet link is similarly profound for Catholic leaders in the U.S. "Like a lot of people, because of the very ugly implications that conclusion has, we're proceeding cautiously, circumspectly," says Russell Shaw, a spokesman for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the U.S. Catholic Conference.

But this desire to be cautious arises in the midst of a divisive debate over whether bishops have been too circumspect in the past in assessing dangers from the Soviet Union. The debate is being carried on mostly in deliberations on the bishops' proposed pastoral letter criticizing nuclear arms and policies. A committee of bishops is revising the letter and should complete its rewriting by mid-March. The new version then will be distributed to all the bishops, and they are scheduled to gather and discuss it in Chicago in May.

Some church officials believe that, regardless of how the investigation is going, the shooting shouldn't affect deliberations over the morality of nuclear arms and policies. "We're trying to analyze these issues as moral issues in an objective way," says Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit, a leader of the church's pacifist movement and one of those working on the letter.

And he doesn't think bishops need to change their thinking about the Soviets because of the shooting inquiry. "In regard to the Soviet Union and their being armed, we've already addressed that in the letter," he says. "We haven't done it enough, but we aren't naive about the Soviet Union."

Bishop Gumbleton thinks the assassination inquiry will have an impact, but he suspects it will be on the reception the letter receives rather than on its content. East European ethnic groups in the U.S. already have been critical of the letter for failing to discuss the Soviets more, he says. "This will only intensify their antagonisms" and make it harder for them to grasp the arguments of nuclear-freeze advocates, he adds.

A 'General Acknowledgement'

Bishop L.T. Matthiesen of Amarillo, Texas, who also has spoken forcefully against nuclear-weapons production, thinks the assassination issue will at least marginally affect the final version of the bishops' statement. He suspects that bishops now might want to include a "clearer recognition" of the problems caused by "atheistic communism."

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